



## Commentary: Friendships and Emotions

by Graham Allan  
Keele University

*Sociological Research Online*, 16 (1) 15  
<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/home.html/16/1/15.html>>  
0.5153/sro.2296

Received: 24 Jan 2011    Accepted: 28 Feb 2011    Published: 28 Feb 2011

### Introduction

**1.1** Friendship is increasingly being recognised by sociologists as a worthy topic of investigation, especially in the light of changes occurring in late-modern society (Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Allan, 2008). Yet relatively little attention has been paid to emotional dimensions of what Bell and Coleman (1999) have termed 'ties of amity', especially in Anglo-American sociology. There is little discussion of the emotional basis of the solidarity between friends, of what emotions friendships generate or, indeed, of the emotional responses experienced when a friend's behaviour is judged as inappropriate. Put simply, we have better knowledge of ideologies of friendship, of the assistance and support friends provide, and of the types of activity in which they engage, than we do of the emotional content of these ties.

**1.2** This makes the collection of essays included in this edition of *Sociological Research Online* particularly welcome. They help to identify some of the key areas with which an analysis of friendship and emotions needs to be concerned, and in the process address numerous issues about the character of contemporary friendships. This commentary will be framed around three of the themes the papers have identified: friendship, emotions and change; friendship in late modernity; and emotions and friendship interactions.

**1.3** First though, it is worth recognizing the diversity of the papers included in the collection, perhaps especially in terms of the different emotional processes and responses on which they are focused. In some respects this diversity of focus is to be expected; it is indicative of the current state of our knowledge about emotional dimensions of different modes of friendship tie. For example, the types of emotion with which the papers principally engage include: trust, anger, love, affection, pride, sorrow, happiness, compassion, shame, envy and feelings of security.' Moreover the ways that these different emotions are drawn on and used in the sociological analyses that are developed in the papers are themselves interestingly varied. Some are concerned with the emotional responses to having friends and spending time with them in a relatively abstract sense; others are more concerned with the emotions experienced during specific interactional episodes; some with the dilemmas of friendship and the emotional responses to them; and still others with the ways friendships are framed emotionally.

### Friendship, emotions and change

**2.1** Before discussing emotional elements of friendship more fully, it is necessary to consider the issue of what constitutes 'friendship'. While the notion of 'real friendship' is regularly presented as the epitome of friendship, ties of amity can take many forms. Importantly, the ways in which friendships are organised and managed reflect the structural circumstances of those who are friends. Thus dominant patterns of friendship change over time and across societies. Silver (1990), for example, has discussed how the notion of non-instrumental friendship arose as a direct consequence of the growth of the political and legal regulation of commercial capitalism. Somewhat similarly, different anthropologists have examined the distinct social organisation and utility of friendship in societies with diverse cultural and material configurations. (See, for example, the collection of papers in Bell and Coleman, 1999.) Equally, people with different structural locations within a given society are also likely to favour different friendship practices, different ways of 'doing' their friendships (Adams and Allan, 1998), an issue emphasised by Wouters (2011) amongst others in this collection. Thus, in different ways in different era, class location, gender, ethnicity, age, family position and the like will impact on the particular ways ties of amity – whether called 'friendship' or some other term – are developed.

**2.2** In other words, these ties are culturally diverse in terms of how they are constituted, the types of exchange they involve and the activities through which they are enacted. Individuals have a degree of freedom – an 'electivity' in Rebughini's (2011) term – to construct their friendship ties as they choose, but inevitably this is relative. These ties are still founded on normative and thus largely taken-for-granted models – or 'blueprints', to draw on Cancian's (1987) term – that are culturally framed. Thus ideas around appropriate reciprocity, how the balance within the ties is sustained, what counts as equitable, and so forth,

are patterned socially, even if individual friends can negotiate variations on the general theme. Similarly who can be friends is rarely *just* an individual matter. The personal networks of others with whom people are involved have the capacity to influence individual friendships. Family members, for example, or other friends may, subtly or otherwise, discourage certain friendships from developing or effectively 'sponsor' others which are seen as more 'suitable'.

**2.3** Similarly, the expression of emotion within different ties of amity is also in part socially structured and controlled. There are normative expectations that inform the emotionality manifested within these relationships, though these normative expectations are, as above, not uniform. Rather they are reflective of the social identities established by those who are friends. Gender identities provide a clear example of this, with masculinities and femininities encouraging different emotional repertoires to be exhibited within friendships. Other aspects of structural location and social identity, such as class, age and ethnicity, similarly pattern how emotionality is expressed in friendships. In addition, temporal shifts come into play here. In particular, emotionality within friendships will vary by cohort, as over time different personal qualities wax and wane in their social desirability. For example, the stoicism expected of men in the mid-twentieth century has to some degree, and at different speeds for men in different social locations, given way to a heightened approval of emotional 'honesty' and openness.

**2.4** One of the valuable themes apparent in the first two papers, by Wouters (2011) and Holmes (2011) respectively, in this collection on friendship and emotions lies in the ways they are able to investigate the friendship blueprints applicable in the contexts that concern them. In drawing on written accounts of the different systems of etiquette seen as appropriate to ties of amity in these different settings, both authors are able first of all to show the different behaviours that are expected of those who develop ties of amity – the ways these relationships are patterned and bounded; what is permitted and what is discouraged. But as well as the behaviours expected in these ties, the respective blueprints also indicate the boundaries of emotional connection and expressivity normatively associated with the relationships.

**2.5** In other words, it is not just behaviour which is circumscribed, but also the ways in which those involved in different ties of amity should respond to, and be involved with, one another at an emotional level. Of course, aside from the protocol discussions Holmes (2011) analyses with regard social networking sites, the codification of friendship blueprints through etiquette guides is now less fashionable and rarer than it was. Indeed the emotional and behavioural boundaries of friendship are now more frequently made apparent through the stories and gossip that follow their being bridged. Yet even if generally implicit, friendships and other such ties are nonetheless typically governed by collective understandings that are drawn on to frame – and in turn control and police – their content.

### **Late-modern blueprints**

**3.1** In terms of emotional connection and expression, some friendship blueprints are more prescriptive than others, some more flexible. As would be expected given the different social milieu involved, those governing the relationships Wouters analyses are much more rigid than those Holmes (2011) discusses in examining 'netiquette'. Given the greater flexibility there is in personal life more generally at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century compared to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, this is hardly surprising. Indeed generally we would expect contemporary friendship blueprints to place a greater emphasis on emotional expressivity than those commonly informing ties of amity 50 or 100 years ago. As various theorists of late modernity have suggested (classically Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), the rise of individualism in its diverse forms has been accompanied by a far greater openness about the self. Culturally there is a heightened emphasis on self-revelation and the display of authenticity and emotional honesty in personal relationships, all of which Giddens characterised well in his arguments about the increased weight attached to 'the project of the self' in late-modern life (Giddens, 1992).

**3.2** These elements are evident in contemporary friendship practices – or at least in some friendships. In particular, many people define real friendships as essentially being about a mutual self-revelation in which each comes to 'really know' the other. The relationship may involve a range of interactions and exchange, but what is seen as crucial to its being a real friendship is the knowledge each has of the other's authentic inner-self. Trust and identity are generally two of the key components within this. In part, the sense of trust emerges from the individuals' shared experiences which provide accumulated evidence that the other can be relied on. Knowledge of the other is implicitly acquired through diverse interactions over time in which the other's values and strengths come to be appreciated, but also their foibles and weaknesses recognised. Experience of the friend has also demonstrated that he or she will act in supportive ways as needed and will not neglect, embarrass, reveal confidences or otherwise let you down in ways regarded as important, a point Rebughini (2011) makes well in her paper in this special section.

**3.3** But in addition what also seems now to be required – at least for some groups – is a more explicit revelation of the self and, in Holmes's (2011) helpful phrase a greater – and more flexible – *emotional reflexivity*. Typically this entails modes of talk which involve being open, sharing intimacies and expressing feelings; in other words, through emotional disclosure allowing the other to enter into your inner world. Without such explicit disclosure – and the trust it signifies – relationships are unlikely to be seen by those involved as being friendships in the fullest sense. As trust is soundly established in a friendship, so that trust itself helps constitute the emotional states of feeling valued and loved which in turn give depth and meaning to that particular relationship. Here Rebughini's (2011) insightful recognition of the significance of friends being 'witnesses' to each other's emotions represents a further dynamic within the establishment of trust.

**3.4** In turn, the argument has often been made that friendship has strong links with identity construction (Hess, 1972; Jerrome, 1984). That is, friendship, as the papers in this special collection show, is not just about shared activities, sociability and personal commitment, it is also about the ways that people come to define themselves. In the language first used by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954), there is social homophily in

friendship; for a variety of reasons, people have friends who tend to be similar to themselves on various social dimensions. In the process of interaction, such friends are complicit in the (on-going) construction of identity (Jerome, 1984; Allan, 2001). Who we understand ourselves to be and how we portray ourselves as ourselves is influenced by those we feel close to within our personal networks, including friends.

**3.5** Indeed, it may be that some of the changes associated with late modernity – in particular, the increased flexibility and fragmentation of personal life – have made the role of friendship stronger in these regards than it was, an argument developed by Rebughini (2011) in her paper on friends' responses to the different 'trials' people face and by Cantó-Milà and Seebach (2011) in their discussion of friendship solidarities in Pro-Ana communities. Or more specifically, this may be the case for some groups of people, perhaps especially for those whose family relationships are less established or have undergone significant change. For example, given the demographic changes there have been in family formation in recent years, especially with regard to the timing of child-bearing, friendships may be especially important in terms of emotional connection and expressivity for young adults. Similarly for those who have separated or divorced, the emotional (as well as other forms of) support that existing or new friendships offer may be of particular consequence for the individual's personal well-being. Björnberg's (2011) paper on asylum seekers' experiences in Sweden also reminds us that some people's situation is such that the risks involved in trusting friends are too great to countenance. The potential costs, especially of relationships involving reciprocity, are too high. A key issue here is that the significance of friendships in people's lives, emotionally and in other ways, is not uniform. At different life course phases, the emotional benefits of specific friendships may become more or less central for an individual's sense of identity and value. Patterns of emotional connectivity between friends not only vary across friendships, they also shift across time.

## **Emotions, interactions and friendship**

**4.1** In considering emotional connectivity and friendship, the focus is tacitly on longer-term emotional aspects of the friend tie. To express this differently, it is more on the relationship between the friends than on the component interactions that comprise the relationship. Clearly these are connected. At one level, the relationship can be seen as the cumulative understandings they have developed through their interactions. However focusing specifically on interactions rather than relationships allows different issues and questions to be raised about the significance of emotions within ties of amity. As Rebughini (2011) develops in her paper, it is important to distinguish between 'the feelings and emotions that characterized a specific friendship bond in that particular moment ... and the thoughts, reflexive narratives and representations of that friendship over time'. More prosaically, the feelings engendered about the relationship will clearly be linked to the emotions emergent in particular episodes of interaction, but these are not synonymous.

**4.2** Indeed with some ties of amity the relationship may of itself not be understood as particularly emotionally charged, or even valuable. But the interactions that occur can still themselves entail emotional experiences. As a simple example, consider a football or other sports team. Some of the team members may have strong friendships with one another, perhaps involving significant personal commitment and disclosure. The majority will not though; they are more likely to see each other as (context and time specific) team mates or buddies rather than close friends. Yet the competitive highs and lows, joys and disappointments, they experience in their collective endeavours are likely to have significant emotional resonance. More revealingly, in their discussion of Finnish drinking events, Maunu and Törrönen (2011) examine emotional responses to friends' behaviour across particular drinking episodes. Not all the relationships are close friendships, yet Maunu and Törrönen (2011) are able to show both the emotional content of the interactions occurring between the friends, and how this content can change quite markedly as the evening progresses.

**4.3** Amongst other things, their paper highlights the importance of context for understanding emotional responses of different types within friendships and other ties of amity. Maunu and Törrönen (2011) discuss what they term 'emotional episodes' in order to analyse people's emotions as they react with the others party to these ties. This concept helps capture the ways people's emotional experiences are shaped by the situations in which their interactions are occurring, but also points to how the emotions experienced during these episodes of interaction can alter and change as each episode develops. Part of the context of the examples Maunu and Törrönen (2011) discuss involves significant consumption of alcohol which itself will influence emotional reactions. However the important analytical issue here lies in the recognition that emotions are situational and not just relational. Different emotions may arise in specific interactions with friends of different forms which need to be understood contextually and in a somewhat different fashion to the understanding of emotional connection within the relationships.

**4.4** Yet clearly interactional episodes have the power to shape emotional responses at the relational level. This is one of the themes developed by Rebughini (2011) in her analysis of the emotional consequences of friendships being 'put to the test'. Drawing on the different personal 'trials' – for example, illness, bereavement or redundancy – that people experience at various times in their lives, Rebughini (2011) explores how the responses of friends to these situations can be transformative of their relationship. At times, the consequent support particular friends provide serves to consolidate the friendship as special; in other cases where friends are perceived to have demonstrated a lack of caring and concern, the experience quite often results in the friendship being undermined and re-interpreted as more emotionally distanced. In either case, the significant issue is how the context of the particular trial generates emotional reactions at a situational level which in turn shape the narrative that comes to define the emotional connection of those in the relationship and consequently the character of their future interactions.

## **Conclusion**

**5.1** As mentioned at the beginning of this Commentary, the papers included in this collection on 'Emotions

and Friendship' are quite diverse. They are diverse in terms of the emotional themes they address, the theoretical perspectives they embrace, the research methods they encompass, the countries they cover and the forms of friendship they consider. Such diversity can be seen as a strength, especially given the comparative absence of previous research in the sociology of friendship that focuses on emotional components. However, it does make any simple synthesis of the papers' findings somewhat difficult. In particular, it is perhaps inevitable that the papers draw on different notions of friendship. As suggested earlier, there can be no easy specification of what constitutes friendship as the modes of connection taken to be involved vary depending on context. Bell and Coleman's (1999) term 'ties of amity' is a useful alternative precisely because it serves to highlight such variation.

**5.2** More specifically, there will be differences in the structuring of ties of amity across different societies and time periods, a theme that is particularly evident in Wouters (2011) paper contrasting English and German friendship blueprints at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But if this is so, then it is also likely to be relevant to contemporary constructions of friendship in different societies. Thus, even allowing for the unifying impact of globalisation in late modernity, it is likely that the emotional connectivities expected of ties of amity vary somewhat from one cultural setting to another. Certainly it is possible to read the friendship accounts included in this collection as indicative of respondents in the separate studies drawing on different understandings of friendship. This serves to highlight the value of such comparative approaches to friendship, not least those which like the papers in this collection focus on the nature of the emotional components of the ties. There is much that could be learnt from further comparative research in these areas.

---

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mary Holmes for her help and encouragement with this Commentary.

---

## References

- ADAMS, R. G. and Allan, G. (1998). *Placing Friendship in Context*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- ALLAN, G. (2001). Personal relationships in late modernity. *Personal Relationships*, 8, 325-339. [doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2001.tb00043.x]
- ALLAN, G. (2008). Flexibility, friendship, and family. *Personal Relationships*, 15, 1-16. [doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2007.00181.x]
- BAUMAN, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- BECK, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1995). *The Normal Chaos of Love*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- BELL, S. and Coleman, S. (1999). *The Anthropology of Friendship*. Oxford: Berg.
- BJÖRNBERG, U. (2011). Social relationships and trust in asylum-seeking families with children. *Sociological Research Online*, <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/1/5.html>>.
- CANCIAN, F. (1987). *Love in America: Gender and self-development*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- CANTÓ-MILÀ, N. and Seebach, S. (2011). Ana's friends: Friendship in online Pro-Ana communities. *Sociological Research Online*, <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/1/1.html>>.
- GIDDENS, A. (1992). *The Transformation of Intimacy*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- HESS, B. (1972). Friendship. In M. Riley and A. Foner (Eds.), *Aging and Society* (pp. 357-393). New York: Russell Sage.
- HOLMES, M. (2011). Emotional reflexivity in contemporary friendships: Understanding it using Elias and Facebook etiquette. *Sociological Research Online*, <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/1/11.html>>.
- JERROME, D. (1984). Good company: The sociological implications of friendship. *Sociological Review*, 32, 696-718.
- LAZARSFELD and Merton (1954). Friendship as social process. In M. Berger, T. Abel and C. Page (Eds.), *Freedom and Control in Modern Society* (pp. 18-66). Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand.
- MAUNU, A. and Törrönen, J. (2011). Friendship and social emotions in young adult Finns' drinking diaries. *Sociological Research Online*, <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/1/4.html>>.
- REBUGHINI, P. (2011). Friendship dynamics between emotions and trials. *Sociological Research Online*, <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/1/3.html>>.
- SILVER, A. (1990). Friendship in commercial society: Eighteenth-century social theory and modern sociology. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95, 1474-1504. [doi:10.1086/229461]
- SPENCER, L. and Pahl, R. (2006). *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today*. Princeton: Princeton

University Press.

WOUTERS, C. (2011). On friendship, equality and introductions: Comparing English and German regimes of manners and emotions. *Sociological Research Online*, <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/1/2.html>>.